

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge

Review Process

Overview

The U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) developed a rigorous design process for the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) peer review that included establishing clear goals, reviewing the ED’s Handbook for the Discretionary Grant Process, and analyzing options. The goals of the process design were to:

- Ensure a *level playing field* for all State applicants.
- Select *expert reviewers*, chosen from a pool of *qualified* educators, policymakers, and scholars who were *impartial* and *unbiased*.
- Maximize *intra- and inter-panel reliability*.
- *Maximize transparency* and *minimize external influences*.

Based on these design goals, ED and HHS developed the following peer review processes:

- ED and HHS selected reviewers based on the qualifications and expertise outlined in the invitation to apply to be a peer reviewer and used a rigorous screening process that included reviews of resumes and additional data, as well as a thorough conflict of interest vetting in coordination with the Ethics Division of the ED Office of the General Counsel.
- ED and HHS provided an extensive training to reviewers on understanding the criteria, using the scoring rubrics, and writing effective comments.
- ED and HHS carefully considered the methods used to organize panels for the review in order to minimize systematic bias, maximize reviewers’ engagement in the applications assigned to them, focus panel discussions around areas of greatest variability, mitigate against conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest, and include quality checks from experienced ED and HHS staff assigned as panel monitors.

ED and HHS used external peer reviewer panels and a two-part review process to judge eligible applications in the RTT-ELC competition. Part 1 of the review process allowed for off-site review and preliminary scoring. Part 2 required peer reviewers to participate in facilitated on-site panel discussions before providing final scores and comments for each application. All peer reviewers received on-site training prior to the off-site review and preliminary scoring.

Application Assignment

Five reviewers read each application. To improve inter-reviewer reliability, program staff assigned reviewers to a unique panel for each application. Reviewers, therefore, had different co-panelists for each application they read.

Each reviewer independently reviewed and scored up to three applications (most reviewers read three applications). Applications were assigned to reviewers randomly to the greatest extent possible. However, no reviewer was assigned an application from their State of residence or for which they had an indirect conflict of interest.

Following the assignment of applications, reviewers were instructed to contact the panel monitors, the competition manager, or a member of the Competition Support Team immediately if, at any time during the review process, they identified an area in which they had a potential conflict of interest. If program staff, in consultation with ED's Ethics Division, determined that a conflict existed, the application was assigned to another reviewer or an alternate reviewer.

Part 1 – Off-Site Review and Preliminary Scoring

Reviewers had approximately three (3) weeks at their homes (off-site) to read applications and enter preliminary scores and comments for each application in the Application Review System (ARS). Reviewers were encouraged to make steady progress and keep up with a suggested timetable outlined by the competition manager. Reviewers were given a deadline of approximately one week before the on-site by which to submit preliminary scores and comments into the ARS.

Panel monitors and the competition manager were available by phone and email to provide logistical guidance on the process and remind reviewers of the suggested timetable and deadlines. Reviewers were instructed not to consult with one another regarding an application prior to convening for the on-site panel discussions.

Upon submission, panel monitors (with assistance of the competition manager and Competition Support Team) reviewed the preliminary comments to ensure that all comments were thorough, clearly addressed the scoring criteria, and justified the reviewer's scores. On occasion, panel monitors requested that reviewers clarify or elaborate their comments to more clearly explain a score. Panel monitors did not provide reviewers with evaluative guidance or feedback on the substance of a State's application or on the content of their comments beyond guidance necessary to ensure that reviewer comments clearly addressed the scoring criteria and adequately justified their scores.

Part 2 – On-Site Review and Final Scoring

On the first day of the on-site review, program staff provided an orientation and instructed reviewers on the process and procedures for the on-site review and panel discussions.

Reviewers were required to attend this on-site review. The on-site review was scheduled over one working week. Reviewers met and discussed applications according to a pre-determined schedule set by the competition manager. All panel discussions were conducted in the presence of, and monitored by, program staff.

Because different groups of reviewers reviewed each application, the schedule for the discussions was fixed, requiring a discrete amount of time to complete the review for each

application. A room was provided for each panel discussion that included sufficient meeting space, a computer for each reviewer, and a printer for each panel. Panelists were instructed not to review or refer to applications other than the one that was being discussed.

Panel discussion. During each scheduled panel discussion, panelists discussed their preliminary scores and comments, and areas with greater degrees of variability in scores among panelists, and asked clarifying questions of one another. Panel monitors reminded panelists that their discussions were to help inform each reviewer's understanding of the criteria and their independent scoring, and that the panel was not required or directed to reach consensus through their discussions. Panel monitors did not offer evaluative guidance or feedback on the substance of a State's application. Panel monitors facilitated the panel discussion in an effort to ensure that panelists had time to discuss all areas of an application within the allotted timeframe.

Finalizing scores and comments. At the conclusion of the panel discussion, reviewers made any revisions to their preliminary comments and scores in the ARS. Reviewers were instructed to revise their preliminary comments and scores only if the reviewer determined that a revision was appropriate. Reviewers then printed their Technical Review Form (TRF) and provided it to the relevant lead and/or support panel monitor. The lead and/or support panel monitor reviewed the TRF for completeness. TRFs were then submitted to the competition manager for final review. The competition manager, with assistance from the Competition Support Team and other designated program staff, provided a final review of all TRFs to ensure that comments were complete, constructive, and sufficiently addressed the scoring criteria.

As outlined in the reviewer guidelines, reviewers were prohibited from discussing any application outside of the panel discussion room, and were prohibited from discussing any application unless the assigned panel monitor, competition manager, or other designated program staff was present. Reviewers were prohibited from discussing any application in public spaces.

A review for a particular application was not considered to be complete until the competition manager or his or her designee determined that scores and comments were entered for all criteria, scores were adequately justified, and each TRF was printed and signed by the reviewer, a panel monitor, and a member of the Competition Support Team.

The on-site review process was not considered to be complete until all TRFs for each application were fully reviewed and signed. Each reviewer was required to remain on-site until all of his or her TRFs were fully reviewed and signed.